NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA

# WHIRLING CURRENTS OF THE SEA

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Ludolf Backhuysen, *Ship on a Rough Sea*, 1701. Etching on laid paper, 17.4 x 24.1 cm. Purchased 1931. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: NGC

The ocean is as complex as it is vast. For people living far inland, it is often discussed in the same terms as the cosmos: it is beautiful, alluring, romantic, but deep and mysterious enough to be frightening. People living closer to the coast understandably view it somewhat differently. For them, the ocean is both a faithful provider and a volatile neighbour, making it worthy of profound gratitude and deep reverence in equal measure.

Given the many shades of the ocean, and the nuances of humanity's relationship with it, it is no surprise that it has long been a source of inspiration for artists. Canada's Homer Watson was one such artist.

Born in 1855 in what is now Kitchener, Ontario, Watson specialized in depictions of the natural world, however, unlike many of his peers, he felt no obligation to show Mother Nature's good side. His pen-and-ink work *Ships at Night,* one of his few seascapes, is a good example of this. In this work, Watson depicts the ocean as a ravenous predator, caught mid-meal. In the foreground, we see an unlucky sailor, slowly vanishing into the beast's great maw, with a look of existential terror on his face. Off in the background, we see a group of ships, clustered together like frightened lambs. Their lanterns fight futilely against the surrounding darkness. Their hulls groan as they are pushed and pulled by the waves. The vessels are hopelessly outmatched by the elements, to the point that they are almost pitiful, and yet, they are all that protects the people on board from the terrible fate that has befallen the man in the water.



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Shoeburyness Fishermen Hailing a Whitstable Hoy*, before 1809. Oil on canvas, 91.7 x 122.2 cm. Purchased 1939. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: NGC



Homer Watson, *Ships at Night*, 1875–1936(?). Pen and black ink, dry brush, and graphite on wove paper, 17.3 x 14 cm. Purchased 1962. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: NGC

J.M.W. Turner seemed to view the ocean through a different lens. To him, the ocean was not so much a killer to be survived, but a challenge to be toppled. Born in London, England, in 1775, Turner was famous for his landscapes and marine paintings, which earned him the nickname "The Painter of Light." His seascapes often depicted storms and shipwrecks, relying heavily on the use of light – or its absence – to illustrate the many faces of the sea.

Turner's *Shoeburyness Fishermen Hailing a Whitstable Hoy*, painted sometime before 1809, depicts two people on a small fishing boat, somewhere off the coast of Whitstable, a small town on the north coast of Kent. One figure is hailing a hoy, a type of cargo vessel used to carry everything from drinking water to military gear to oysters. As with many of Turner's works, this painting captures the ocean's moodiness – frothing waves, a huge bank of grey cloud, and a great swathe of sunlight blazing across the sky in the far distance. It is the fishing boat and hoy, however, that really catch the eye, undoubtedly by design.

During Turner's lifetime, England's fate was tied to the sea, not only because it provided food, but also because of its importance to an ever-expanding trade network and to the country's navy, then the most powerful in the world. The artist clearly felt a deep affinity for mariners, these tenacious people who braved the waves and the wind each day to feed and protect the country. To him, they were a symbol of triumph, and a testament to humankind's mastery over the ocean.

That achievement has been hard-earned, paid for with countless shipwrecks, and a far greater number of lives, yet it has allowed our species to transform the ocean from a source of fear and danger into a source of food and income and, finally, into a source of enjoyment.



John O'Brien, *Yacht Race at Halifax*,1850. Oil on canvas, 31 x 44.5 cm. Purchased 1958. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: NGC

From umbrella-pocked beaches of the Mediterranean to the shores of Portugal to the coasts of Hawaii, where the world's boldest surfers ride the world's biggest waves, people all over the world find endless joy in the ocean. The 1850 painting *Yacht Race at Halifax* by Canadian artist John O'Brien captures one of these moments. Growing up in Halifax, O'Brien developed a keen interest in the city's booming maritime industry, an interest that grew in tandem with his natural talent as a painter. By the time he painted *Yacht Race at Halifax*, he had already begun establishing himself locally, and one can see why his work was catching on. In the painting, which likely depicts a low-stakes race in one of the many regattas that occurred around Halifax at the time, the sea is alive, even playful. Its waves are flitting, like the paws of a happy kitten, and the sun has punched through an overcast sky to bathe the boaters on the yacht in its warmth. The wind is strong and they are flying. This was a day full of laughter, when people returned home with big smiles and sunburned noses.



Thomas Joshua Cooper, *The Swelling of the Sea, West, The Atlantic Ocean, Point of Ardnamurchan, The Furthest West, Scotland*, 1990. Gelatin silver print, toned, 56.5 x 81.1 cm. Purchased 1995. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: NGC

Although Watson, Turner and O'Brien all portray the ocean very differently, their works share one key similarity. Each piece shows the ocean as it exists in relation to humankind. That, of course, is a pretty simplistic way to look at it. The ocean has spent the vast majority of its time on Earth without us. It was moving mountains and carving out canyons for millennia before we ever rose up on two legs, and it will continue to do so long after we are gone.

The work by American photographer Thomas Joshua Cooper provides a subtle reminder of this. Cooper is considered a leading figure in modern landscape photography. One of his proudest projects – the series called *The Swelling of the Sea* (1990–2001) – sought to capture the character of the waters off the northernmost, southernmost, easternmost and westernmost points of mainland Scotland. He began in 1990 on the west coast, at the rocky edge of Ardnamurchan Point, where he made a single photograph of the ocean's roiling surface. The true power of this particular photograph is that it shows us the ocean as it exists without us. There are no ships to be seen, no fishermen, no swimmers. Just a small patch of salt water, bound by cycles more ancient than any human creation: shifting shadows, surging surf, whirling currents.

For all of its influence on our species, this is the ocean's true face.

**J.W.M. Turner's *Shoeburyness Fishermen Hailing a Whitstable Hoy* is on view in Room C211 and John O'Brien's *Yacht Race at Halifax* in Room A103 at the National Gallery of Canada; the works by Ludolf Backhysen, Homer Watson and Thomas Joshua Cooper, currently not on view, form part of the Gallery's collection. Share this article and subscribe to our newsletters to stay up-to-date on the latest articles, Gallery exhibitions, news and events, and to learn more about art in Canada.**